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**The Acts of the Apostles**  
**IX. The Stoning of Stephen**  
**Acts 6:1-15, 7:54-60**

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On August 8, 1991, the Bayer Bess Vanderwarker advertising agency launched what is still considered to be one of the best and most popular advertising campaigns ever. The name of that campaign: “Be Like Mike.”<sup>1</sup> The product being advertised was Gatorade, but the real star was, of course, Michael Jordan. The commercial opened with footage from Game 2 of the 1991 NBA Finals, showing Jordan performing an amazing layup, shifting the ball from his right hand to his left while in midair. Then there was a scene of Jordan dunking the ball, followed by a child attempted to dunk with his tongue sticking out – just the way Jordan had done it. Be Like Mike said the commercial – and all you needed to be like Mike was to drink more Gatorade. It was a great commercial – and also an utter lie. I drank a lot of Gatorade back in my day, and never once was I able to play basketball like Michael Jordan.

This morning we meet Stephen, the first martyr and great saint of the early church. And it is tempting, as we read his story, to turn his life an example that we should all seek to follow. In other words, to reduce this story down to the moral exhortation: Be Like Stephen. But as with Michael Jordan, that would be misleading at best and useless at worst. Be like Stephen – it’s not going to happen, despite our best efforts. In fact, our best efforts are entirely beside the point. Saints like Stephen are not self-made, they are God-raised-up. Frederick Buechner has a wonderful definition of saints in his book, *Wishful Thinking*: “*In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. Those handkerchiefs are called saints.*”<sup>2</sup> Sainthood is not something we attain by our own efforts, regardless of how hard we try to be like Stephen. Saints are something only God can create – and they are very rare. But, indeed, their existence is part of God’s “flirtation with the world” – God seeking to get our attention, as part of His great desire that we should come to love Him as He has first loved us.<sup>3</sup>

But, back to the matter at hand. If the message of Stephen’s story is not “Be Like Stephen,” then what is it? The message of Stephen’s story for us, lies not so much in what Stephen does and is, but rather in what Stephen enables us to see about God, about this world, and about ourselves through what he does and is. By looking at Stephen’s life, and death, we are enabled by God to see things which are otherwise often hidden from us in our daily living. In looking at Stephen, God’s handkerchief, we see important truths about God, our world, and ourselves that, once glimpsed and received, do indeed have the power to transform us in a saintly direction, and so also to transform our living in this world.

So what does Stephen enable us to see? Let's look first at the way Stephen is described at the start of his story. Having been selected by the Apostles to serve as a deacon, caring for those in need, Stephen is then described as *"a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."* But the most telling description of Stephen comes after he is arrested on made-up charges. After Stephen is arrested, the fake charges are read before the council and then – before Stephen even begins his defense, which makes up the bulk of chapter seven – we read this: *"And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel."*

The face of an angel – in other words, in Stephen we see a fully formed Christian, a person so inwardly transformed by Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit that he has become outwardly transformed into an appearance that can only be described as heavenly. His face, as his life, have been made radiant in its reflection of the beauty of our Lord and Savior Himself. And, as such, Stephen is, already in that moment on earth, what we shall one day be in the Kingdom of Heaven – when Christ's work is at last complete in us also.

What Stephen is in that moment – *"And gazing at him . . . they saw that his face was like the face of an angel"* – what Stephen is in that moment is exactly what you and I are even now, though much more slowly, but even now being made into by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. We are, even now, being made beautiful in the holiness of our Savior. And it is a work that will be complete in us on that day when we are made fully new in God's Kingdom. That is the promise of Stephen's saintly appearance – that what Stephen was in this life, that rare saint of God, we are already on the way to becoming in the next. As I John puts it: *"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him."*<sup>4</sup> Paul, who remember was looking on as Stephen was stoned, puts it this way in his second letter to the Corinthians: *"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."*<sup>5</sup>

So while we may never dunk like Michael Jordan, may never be a heroic martyr like Stephen – still, looking upon Stephen, we are reminded that Jesus Christ is even now in the process of making us beautiful, making us holy, making us radiant in the reflection of His eternal glory. Looking at Stephen we see the truth of what God is even now doing in our lives, though most often hidden from our view. We don't readily perceive the changes God is making in us, but looking at Stephen we can know that we **are** being changed into the angelic creature, that beautiful person, the saint we were always meant to be – and shall be in His heaven forever. The world, and our own conscience, has a thousand ways of telling us that we are not yet beautiful – but Scripture assures us that we are on the way to beautiful, because the same Spirit that was at work in Stephen is at work also in us.

And while is it entirely the Spirit's work in us, the grace of Christ in us, which makes this transformation possible – that doesn't mean that we cannot, or are not expected to, cooperate with the Spirit's working. Remember that Stephen is described as *"a man full of faith"* – which means that he was cooperating with the Spirit's work by his own devotion to Scripture, prayer, worship, service, and all the other daily deeds of faith. By our own faithful, daily dedication to God and to the things of God, we open ourselves up to what God wants to work in us. And so also by the way we treat one another we can help the Spirit's working in them. C. S. Lewis has this wonderful

passage in Mere Christianity where, after talking about how we are being transformed, he speaks to just this point:

*It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in nightmares. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all politics.<sup>6</sup>*

In Stephen we see the beauty of what we shall become, as the Spirit slowly changes us into the image of Christ, from one degree of glory to another.

A second truth Stephen enables us to see, another one mostly hidden from our eyes on a daily basis. After his defense before the council, the council is even more enraged – basically because he has told them they were wrong about Jesus and missing the boat entirely on this new thing God is doing in their midst. As we read in our passage, “*Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.*” But, in that moment when Stephen’s fate is now clearly sealed, suddenly Stephen looks up – and the sky above him has parted, such that he sees into heaven itself. He sees the glory of God upon His heavenly throne, and “*Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*”

What Stephen sees in that moment, in other words, is a truth about our world and about our God which is veiled from our eyes – not by the clouds, so much as by all the sorrow and suffering, sin and sadness, war and violence, sickness and misery and division and hatred and every other form of evil upon the face of this earth. Stephen looks up and sees that God really is in control of all things, really is Lord over earth, as well as heaven. Sees that heaven is real and that it is life as it is right here and now on this fallen earth which is the shadow realm, the illusion soon to pass away. What Stephen sees, as plain as day, is something we can only know through faith, hope, and love – namely, as one my favorite hymns puts it, “*That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.*”<sup>7</sup> On earth, Stephen may just about to be stoned to death – but what he sees in heaven is that even so, God reigns. And that God shall indeed bring all things round to good in the end.

I love the way my teacher, John Leith, put this in one of his books. He describes how the disciples, after Good Friday, just gave in to utter despair – Jesus was dead and all was lost, or so it seemed to them. And so, not knowing what else to do, they went back to what they knew as the “real world,” to their fishing boats and such. But then, writes Dr. Leith, “*God raised Jesus Christ from the dead on Easter morning, undoing what wicked and evil persons had done on Good Friday.*” Which meant – and here he writes this magnificent sentence: “*The ‘real world’ is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*”<sup>8</sup> “*Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*”

Or this, one of my favorite ways of thinking about the reality of this world in light of Jesus' resurrection and God's rule and the Kingdom to come. I've told this to you before, but it bears repeating. A young seminary student, Steve Dublanica, was spending the day with his godfather at an art museum in New York City. Together they were looking at a large medieval tapestry hanging on the wall. His godfather, however, was not staring at the front of the tapestry, but rather at the back of it. Puzzled by this, Dublanica went over to where his godfather was looking at the back of the tapestry to try to see what was so interesting. His godfather, noting him there beside him, said to him, *"What do you see?"* Dublanica looked even more intently at the back of the tapestry to try to see what his godfather was seeing – but all he could see was a tangled mess of threads, rough and frayed, betraying the handiwork of the one who had woven the tapestry. So, lacking what he thought must be the right answer, he went ahead and gave an honest answer. He said to his godfather, *"I see a mess."* His godfather was delighted with this answer. He smiled and said *"Yes"* to his godson. And then he added this:

*"I like looking at the back of the tapestry because it's a lot like real life. A mess. It makes no sense, there seems to be no order or beauty."*

*Then, his arms on my shoulders, he moves me to the front of the tapestry. I look at it. Undimmed by the centuries – it's gorgeous.*

*"But every once in a while God gives you a glimpse of the other side and it all begins to make sense," he says gently.*

*I'm silent. I know something important has happened but I'm too young to understand.*

*I look at my godfather. He's a Byzantine Catholic priest. With his beard and his flowing robes he really looks like an Obi-Wan – except he's the real thing.*

*"No one is unimportant. We all play a part in designing life's tapestry. You never know what your effect on people is going to be. When you think the world is ugly, makes no sense, remember there is always another side. If you're lucky God will grant you a peek . . . Remember life is beautiful – even when you can't always see it."*<sup>9</sup>

*"But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."* The world rarely allows us to see clearly of God's Lordship and Rule over heaven and earth. It is so often just a mess down here. But looking at Stephen we see this great and reassuring truth: that our Lord Jesus really is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End of all things<sup>10</sup> – and that, in the end, His will shall be done on earth. In the end, He shall bring all things round to good.<sup>11</sup> In the end, His love shall win over all that would stand against it. In the end, all things will be beautiful and good once again, just as God made them to be at the beginning.<sup>12</sup>

There is one last thing Stephen enables us to see – and it is also right there where he gazes up into heaven and sees the throne of God. Listen again: *"But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."* Did you hear it? Remember what we say every Sunday in the Apostles' Creed: *"He ascended into*

heaven and . . .” What comes next? “*And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*” Sitteth, says the creed. In fact, sitteth is how Jesus is depicted in all such Scriptural visions of heaven. But what does Stephen see? “*Behold,*” he cries out, “*I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*” Why does Stephen see Jesus standing when in all other Scriptural depictions of heaven Jesus is seated?

The church, historically, has tried out a lot of explanations for this – but only one has really stuck. Namely that Stephen sees Jesus standing because Jesus is rising up to receive His beloved and faithful servant into heaven once the stones have done their work. One theologian puts it like this: “*Like a man rising up from his chair to greet a friend, Jesus rose to greet Stephen.*” And then he finishes the thought with what we are meant to see in Stephen’s sight of Jesus standing at the right hand of God: “*In a sense, this is the visual depiction of what all Christians want to hear when they meet their Savior face to face: ‘Well done, good and faithful servant . . . Enter into the joy of your master.’*”<sup>13</sup>

What we see in what Stephens sees, Jesus standing, is something I sure want to see, and I’m sure you also want to see – on that day when we come before His throne in glory: Jesus rising up to embrace us, rising up to welcome us into the place He has prepared for us<sup>14</sup>, rising up to pronounce His eternal blessing upon us: “*Well done, good and faithful servant . . . Enter into the joy of your master.*”<sup>15</sup>

We may never be able to play basketball like Mike, ever to be a heroic martyr like Stephen. But by the grace of our Lord Jesus, and by our own desire to cling to that grace, and by Stephen’s own experience, we can be assured that the day will come when Jesus standing to welcome us home is precisely what we will get to see.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhMEfITllg4>

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> I John 4:19.

<sup>4</sup> I John 3:2.

<sup>5</sup> II Corinthians 3:18.

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 45-46.

<sup>7</sup> Maltbie D. Babcock, “This Is My Father’s World.”

<sup>8</sup> John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Dublanica, blogpost entitled “Tapestry”, accessed on-line at <http://waiterrant.net/?p=88> .

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 21:6.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 1:31.

<sup>13</sup> R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *Acts 1-12 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2018), p. 102.

<sup>14</sup> John 14:2-3.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 25:23.